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ABSTRACT

A replication was conducted of Sterling Leonard's 1932 survey of "Current English Usage," which submitted a questionnaire of expressions to judges consisting of linguists, journalists, teachers, and businessmen. It was hypothesized that more of the expressions in Leonard's study would be acceptable today (looser standards) than was the case 50 years ago. In the replication, respondents were asked to indicate whether the expressions was acceptable for writing, acceptable for speech, or not acceptable for either. The responses indicate that there has been no significant change in English language judgments or standards since the original Leonard survey. Linguists and teachers of English as a second language accepted more stylistic variation than did the other groups surveyed, especially among the "other teachers" group. English teachers seemed more concerned with matters of grammatical form and agreement than did the others. Journalists were relatively more conservative in matters of style and grammar than were those in the English teaching profession. Teachers who were not trained in or teaching language subjects appeared to be the most conservative judges of language use. Although they rejected more usage items than any of the other groups, they ignored most disputed grammatical forms and concentrated on questions of stylistic choice. It is suggested that the results provide an added argument against the current questionable practice of putting untrained teachers in the English classroom. (SW)

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CURRENT ENGLISH USAGE: ATTITUDES AND STANDARDS

by Don M. Seigel, Northeastern Illinois University

Paper delivered at the 17th Annual Convention of International TESOL, March 19, 1983

In 1932, the National Council of Teachers of English published a survey of Current English Usage by Sterling Leonard. In his introduction to that study, Leonard said that the pronouncements of usage dictionaries and guides are "... based on traditional pronouncements and of dubious value. ... Allowable practice is based on the actual practice of cultivated people rather than on the rules of logic and syntax." (page 95)

In order to get a record of current English usage, he submitted a questionnaire of 230 expressions to 229 judges. The judges included linguists, elementary and secondary teachers, authors, journalists, businessmen and teachers of speech. The expressions were to be judged:

1. formally correct (literary English)
2. standard, cultivated, colloquial English
3. Popular, illiterate speech

The 230 expressions fell into two general categories:

1. Items of grammatical form and agreement; and
2. meaning changes, idioms, and items of diction.

Some of the items of the first type are illustrated on the second page of the handout (Chart III). For instance,

Verb forms:
9. It don't make any difference what you think.
11. She sung very well.

Noun number in:
15. Don't get these kind of gloves.

Or Pronoun forms:
12. You are older than me
14. Yourself and your guest are invited.

Adjectives, the comparative and superlative forms:
10. Of the two disputants, the warmest is generally in the wrong.
19. In a collision with a Packard, our car got the worse of it.

Adverbial use of adjectives:
4. Drive slow down the hill.

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Examples of the second type, items involving meaning change, idiom or diction are illustrated in the following:

6. I will go providing you keep away.
8. In this connection, I should add...
25. It was good and cold when I came in.

In scoring the responses, Leonard set up three categories: Established, if 75% or more of the judges ranked the item "literary" or "standard," Illiterate, if 75% or more of the judges ranked it "illiterate" or "popular;" Disputable, if less than 75% but more than 25% of the judges ranked it "literary" or "standard."

The results of the responses by linguists who answered the survey were: Established, 107 items (46%); Disputable, 80 items (34%); and Illiterate, 43 items (18.6%)

Since this study was conducted over fifty years ago, I thought it would be interesting to see what changes in judgements have occurred in the intervening period. Most popular commentators on the English language, journalists such as Edwin Newman, William Safire, and John Simon seem to think that the English language in America is going to the "dogs." The subtitle of Newman's popular volume, Strictly Speaking, is Will America be the Death of English? My hypothesis, therefore, was that more of the expressions in Leonard's study would be acceptable today--looser standards--than was the case fifty years ago.

Although my replication of the Leonard study is still in process, I am able to report what I think are some interesting preliminary results.

Thus far I have the results of approximately 100 questionnaires containing 100 questions that appeared in the Leonard study. Of these 100 questions, 54% had been rated Established by the linguists, 33% Disputable, and 19% Illiterate.

My respondents are made up of four groups: 1. journalists; 2. linguists, English Second Language, and College Composition teachers; 3. other teachers who do not teach language subject matter or language skills; and 4. business people who are mostly business correspondents and secretaries, but also some realtors. The journalists were from the Milwaukee Journal, Ebony and Jet.

The respondents were asked to mark the questionnaires as: Acceptable for writing, Acceptable for speech, or Not Acceptable for either. I did not use Leonard's terms for usage standards (literary, colloquial, etc.)

In compiling the results of the survey, I used the same 75% standard that Leonard used to determine Acceptable items, Disputable items, and Rejected (non-standard) items. The results, broken down into categories of responding groups, appear on Chart I. The results

show that linguists-ESL teachers marked the most items Acceptable for speech and writing, 42%; followed by the business group with 38%; then journalists with 25%; and finally other teachers with 17% Acceptable. Likewise, linguists-ESL teachers etc. found the fewest number of items to be Non-Standard with 14%, followed by business people (18%), journalists (26%), and other teachers (28%). These results are compared with the linguists in Leonard's study who respond to the same questions with a 53% Acceptable and 19% Non-Standard.

From these percentages, it appears that the linguists-ESL teachers of today are much more conservative than those of Leonard's survey in 1927. However, the linguists surveyed by Leonard were not entirely comparable to the group I surveyed. Leonard's group did not include ESL teachers, composition teachers, and college English teachers. His group of linguists included dialect researchers, lexicographers, and grammarians. Language skills teachers were put into different groups. Also, I haven't yet surveyed all two-hundred thirty of the items on Leonard's questionnaire. Percentages may change when the entire questionnaire is replicated.

However, I am more confident about the relative positions of the sub-groups surveyed. In 1971, Raymond Crisp did an elaborate survey, based on the Leonard study (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Illinois, Urbana). His results (Chart II) from 788 respondents show the same relative position of linguists, business people, and journalists as my survey. Moreover, the interval separating journalists and English teachers in his survey is very close to the interval separating journalists and linguists-ESL teachers in my survey: for Acceptable, a 15% gap between the English teacher and the journalist in Crisp's survey; a 17% gap in my survey.

It appears from Crisp's study that there was almost no change in judgements on a percentage basis from linguists in the Leonard survey of 40 years before. My survey would indicate a slightly more conservative position.

So far, there are two conclusions that can be drawn from the survey which are of particular interest to teachers of English:

1. There has been no significant change in attitudes towards usage over the past fifty years. Certainly, we can reassure Edwin Newman that "Americans most likely will not be the death of English!" and

2. Linguists and language skills teachers are in general less restrictive in usage judgements than other groups of educated users of the language.

When we look at the four groups' responses to individual items, this difference between language oriented teachers and other teachers is interestingly highlighted.

The charts on the second page of the handout (III and IV) are divided into three categories:

1. Those items judged Acceptable in the Leonard Study but rejected by my respondents;

2. Those items judged Disputable in the Leonard Study but rejected by my respondents; and

3. Those items judged Disputable in the Leonard Study but judged Standard by my respondents.

As the chart indicates, twenty items which were judged Acceptable or Disputable in the Leonard Study were Rejected by my respondents (Items 1-20). Eleven (11) items judged Disputable in the original study were judged Standard in my study (Items 21-31).

As mentioned earlier, there are two basic types of language items being surveyed in the Leonard Study: items that contain disputed grammatical forms or agreement errors; and items which involve meaning and stylistic choice primarily.

In the first set of items on Chart III (nos. 1-8), judged Acceptable in the Leonard Study but Rejected by my respondents, usages involve stylistic choice rather than grammatical forms with the possible exception of item 4.

In the second set of items (9-20), Disputable in the Leonard Study but judged Non-Standard in my survey, four items--16, 17, 18 and 20 are a question of meaning and stylistic choice. The others--9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15 and 19 involve disputed grammatical forms or questions of agreement.

In the third set of items, Chart IV (21-31), the Disputable items, judged Standard by my respondents, involve word meaning or stylistic choice.

On the right half of the charts, the responses of each group of respondents is shown. For items 1-20, an X after the sentence means that it was Rejected. For items 21-31, an X means that the item was Accepted by that group.

The differences between language oriented teachers and the other groups are interesting. The Linguists and Language Skill Teachers do not Reject any items in the first group (items 1-8). In the second group, they Reject items 9, 10, 14 and 16. All but 16 are grammatical forms or agreement errors. In the third group, they found all items Acceptable or Standard, except 28--like--used as a conjunction; but they approved the same use in 22. Their judgement on like as a conjunction is therefore inconclusive.

Journalists, on the other hand, Rejected 9 items. Seven (7) items fall into the grammatical category--items 9-15. Two (2)

rejections were stylistic, a misplaced modifier (1), and a noun to verb function change (2). The journalists, however, gave ratings of Standard to only five of ten Disputable items (9, 17, 18, 19 and 20).

Of particular interest are the responses of the other teachers, those who are not teaching language skills. These are in sharp contrast to the responses of the ESL teachers. Other Teachers Rejected a total of eleven (11) items, more than any other group. In the first set, items 1-8, they ejected all except item 2, the grammatical-function change. All of these items had been judged Acceptable in the Leonard Study, and Linguists-ESL teachers had Rejected none of these. In the second set, other teachers Rejected items 9, 18 and 19. Items 9 and 19 are questionable grammatical forms, no. 18 is stylistic. A total of nine (9) of the eleven (11) items Rejected by other teachers are stylistic; two are grammatical forms. Finally, they approved of only four (4) of the ten Disputable forms, which were judged Standard by the whole group.

There are at least five inferences to be drawn from this survey:

1. The responses indicate that there has been no significant change in English language judgements or standards since the original Leonard Survey, fifty years ago. Even the relative position of the subgroups participating in the survey have remained the same. Further, if standards are changing among educated users of English, it would appear to be towards a slightly more conservative attitude.

2. ESL teachers and linguists accept more stylistic variation than the other groups surveyed, especially among the other teachers group. English teachers seem more concerned with matters of grammatical form and agreement than the others.

3. Journalists are relatively more conservative in matters of style and grammar than the English teaching profession. This no doubt reflects restrictions placed on journalistic practices by their sources--i.e. dictionaries of usage and style books, which tend to be very conservative--and by the constraints of the critical audiences who read their writing.

4. Other Teachers, those who are not trained or teaching language subjects and skills at any level, appear to be the most conservative judges of language use. However, it is instructive to note that although they rejected more usage items than any of the other groups, they ignored most disputed grammatical forms and concentrated on questions of stylistic choice. It would seem that this group bases its judgements on idiosyncratic or subjective criteria.

This highly conservative attitude of the other teachers group towards language is called "hyper-correction" by sociolinguists and reflects linguistic insecurity. What sociolinguists have found is that middle class speakers of the language tend to be very self-conscious about their language use. They will choose what they believe to be the "most correct" language forms and linguistic registers when given a choice, even though they do not use the forms themselves. In effect, then, this means that the group, other teachers, are considering fewer external sources for language standards in making language judgements than the other groups.

5. This brings me to the final point, and this is especially relevant for the ESL teacher at this convention. Around the U.S.A. today, many state affiliates of International TESOL are struggling to establish State Certification requirements for teaching ESL in the Elementary and Secondary Schools. The results of this survey, thus far, represents an added argument against the current questionable practice of putting untrained teachers in the English classroom. It should be apparent from these survey results that knowledge of the English language alone is not a sufficient qualification for teaching English to others. At the very least, a teacher who lacks English skills training may be a source of misinformation about the language and unrealistic in making judgments about correctness of use. Obviously, teachers of English to speakers of other languages need specific training in language subjects to do that teaching.

I want to emphasize that the results I have presented here are only tentative. But the indications are that attitudes generally about correctness in English usage have not significantly changed over the years and that the ESL teachers, as well as other English language skill teachers and linguists, make reasoned judgements about usage.

CHART I

CURRENT ENGLISH USAGE

Responses to 100 item English Usage Questionnaire

	Acceptable	Disputable	Non-Standard
Leonard Survey 1927 (Linguists)	53%	33%	19%
Linguistics-ESL Teacher	42%	41%	14%
Journalists	25%	49%	26%
Other Teachers	17%	54%	28%
Business People	38%	54%	18%
Whole Group	28%	50%	19%

CHART II

Crisp Study, 1971 (based on Leonard Survey)

Survey (Linguists)	46.6%	34.7%	18.6%
Linguists	47+%	36%	15%
English Teachers	46+%	36+%	16+%
Journalists	31+%	47%	20+%
Business People	35.8%	44.6%	19.5%

CHART III

Acceptable in Leonard Study judged Non-Standard in current study.	Journalists	ESL-Linguists Tchrs	Other Tchrs	Business People
1. The invalid was able partially to raise his body.	x		x	x
2. We taxied to the station to catch the train.	x			
3. You may ask whomsoever you please.			x	
4. Drive slow down the hill.			x	x
5. I had rather go at once.			x	
6. I will go providing you keep away.			x	
7. Factories were mostly closed on election day.			x	
8. In this connection, I should add ...			x	
Disputable in Leonard Study judged Non-Standard in current study.				
9. It don't make any difference what you think.	x	x	x	x
10. Of the two disputants, the warmest is generally in the wrong.	x	x		
11. She sung very well.	x			x
12. You are older than me.	x			
13. Neither author nor publisher are subject to censorship.	x			x
14. Yourself and your guest are invited.	x	x		
15. Don't get these kind of gloves.	x			
16. Either of these three roads is good.		x		x
17. I read in the papers where a plane was lost.			x	
18. She leaped off of the moving car.			x	
19. In a collision with a Packard, our car got the worse of it.			x	x
20. It's a little ways farther.				x

CHART IV

Disputable in Leonard Study judged Standard in current study.	Journalists	ESL-Linguists Tchrs	Other Tchrs	Business People
21. Leave me alone, or else get out.		x		
22. We don't often see sunsets like they have in the tropics.		x		
23. I can't seem to get this problem right.	x	x		
24. I was pretty mad about it.	x	x	x	x
25. It was good and cold when I came in.		x		
26. That boy's mischievous behavior aggravates me.		x	x	x
27. Yes, our plan worked just fine.	x	x		
28. It looked like they meant business.				x
29. The man was very amused.	x	x	x	x
30. The child was weak due to improper feeding.		x		x
31. The clock must be fixed.	x	x	x	x